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AUTHOR Bauer, Norman J.
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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the rhetoric and consequences of extreme religious right-wing groups' attack on American public schools. The first section identifies two competing world perspectives, the modern and postmodern perspectives. The second section identifies the fundamental principle that enables the two competing perspectives to coexist: the First Amendment to the Constitution, specifically, the church-state separation clause. Some of the political and educational strategies used by the radical Religious Right to achieve its theocratic and educational aims are described in section 3. The fourth section develops suggestions for maintaining religious pluralism and church-state separation, which include: (1) develop a renewed sense of common cultural purposes; (2) defend and preserve the principle of church-state separation; (3) adopt the role of "civic pedagogue"; (4) engage in action to thwart the efforts of those who had declared a cultural war; (5) recognize "civil religion" as the nation's binding element; and (6) replace the metaphor of the "melting pot" with that of the "round table." In conclusion, the assault on American public schools and effort to construct a theocracy is a conflict over the basic way in which people perceive reality. (LMI)

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THE POLITICS OF THEOCRACY: PUBLIC SCHOOLS UNDER ATTACK

Norman J. Bauer, Ed.D.
Professor of Social Foundations of Education

State University of New York
Geneseo, New York

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". . . reciting a prayer a day (or even several) provides no more assurance that those in the classroom pews will be morally upright than repeating the Pledge of Allegiance makes the graduates of our schools true patriots. Moral Education does not come that easily."

Etzioni, 97

"I'm frankly sick and tired of the political preachers across this country telling me as a citizen that if I want to be a moral person, I must believe in 'A', 'B', 'C', and 'D'. Just who do they think they are? And from where do they presume to claim the right to dictate their moral beliefs to me? And I am even more angry as a legislator who must endure the threats of every religious group who thinks it has some God-granted right to control my vote on every roll call in the Senate."

Goldwater, xvii-xviii.

"It is proper to take alarm at the first experiment on our liberties. . . . Who does not see that the same authority which can establish Christianity, in exclusion of all other Religions, may establish with the same ease any particular sect of Christians, in exclusion of all other Sects? That the same authority which can force a citizen to contribute three pense only of his property for the support of any establishment, may force him to conform to any other establishment in all cases whatsoever?"

Madison (1993) 59.

"The manifest object of the men who framed the institutions of this country was to have a State without religion and a Church without politics - that is to say, they meant that one should never be used as an engine for the purposes of the other. . . . For that reason they built a wall of complete and perfect partition between the two."

Black, 53.

"It is commoly urged that, in a war between Liberals and fanatics, the fanatics are sure to win, owing to their more unshakable belief in the righteousness of their cause. This belief dies hard, although all history, including that of the last few years, is against it. Fanatics have failed over and over again, because they have attempted the impossible, or because, even when what they aimed at was possible, they were too unscientific to adopt the right means; they have failed also because they roused the hostility of those whom they wished to coerce."

Russell, 19.

Purposes

The purposes of this paper are (1) to identify a number of significant attributes of two competing perspectives of the world, one of which lies at the root of the twin aims of the Radical Religious Right, to transform our society into a Christian Theocracy , and to destroy our nation's public school systems; (2) to identify the fundamental principle which enables these two competing perspectives to co-exist, and which constitutes the primary cultural impediment which is preventing the Radical Religious Right from easily achieving both its theocratic and its educational aims; (3) to identify and describe some of the political and educational strategies which the Radical Religious Right employs to achieve both its theocratic and educational aims; and (4) to develop a number of normative suggestions which might guide those of us who percieve the threat posed by the Radical Religious Right to our democratic institutions as a whole, to our public schools in particular, to free, unfettered democratic discourse, about all matters wherever we find ourselves.

Assumptions:

As I have constructed this paper my beliefs have caused me to assume that:

>> Evangelical Christians have the right to organize, to run for office, to lobby, to boycott, to demonstrate, to enter the public square whenever and wherever they wish in an attempt to persuade the public to accept their frames of reference, their values, their intentions.

>> A healthy democracy encourages and depends on the participation of evangelical Christians in the public square; indeed, their voice adds to the jumble of voices which one encounters in the public square; thereby achieving a 'natural' government so constructed, in the words of Madison "that its several constituent parts may , by their mutual relations, be the means of keeping each other in their proper places" (Hofstadter, 8). Indeed, as Hofstadter has observed, the Founding Fathers believed that such a properly designed state "would check interest with interest, class with class, faction with faction, and one branch of government with another in a harmonious system of mutual frustration" (Hofstadter, 8-9).

>> Public schools everywhere are under full-scale assault by the Radical Religious Right and its allies; that ideological advocates of this perspective are spreading propaganda about our public schools, charging that they are teaching "witchcraft", "humanism" and other "anti-God" ideas; that sectarian voting blocs are trying to tear down the wall of separation between church and state; and that they have every intention of

acquiring control of public schools from top to bottom - from the teacher's desk to seats on the school board" (Church & State).

>> Americans are unlikely to buy into the Radical Religious Right package if they know what it is.

Two Competing World Perspectives

For the purposes of this paper I shall refer to these two world perspectives as the *modern* and the *post-modern* perspectives. Each of these perspectives has had its own dominating metaphysic, its own view of knowledge, its particular perception of moral understanding.

The Modern Perspective

Its Metaphysic: Nascent signs of an emerging modern perspective can be detected during the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance, becoming increasingly more evident during the late 16th and throughout the 17th and 18th centuries. This 300 year period was marked by the theories about the universe which were generated by Copernicus and Kepler.

Shortly after their work, understanding our world was profoundly and everlastingly affected by the process of interpreting nature which emerged in 1620 from Bacon's *Novum Organum* in which he argued that one "must turn from words to a study of things, in order to discover nature's

laws. Instead of attempting to extract truth deductively by the employment of syllogistic forms, one must employ induction, must systematically observe, experiment, and employ one's reason about things and their mode of behavior" (Creighton, vii).

Using the method of induction, such 17th century interpreters of nature as Galileo, Descartes, and Newton were destined to introduce us to a mechanical universe which had been created by God and was governed by natural laws; a universe which was seen as predictable, as certain, as unchanging.

It took some time to shed the scholastic, salvation-centered vision which had dominated the western world since the early middle ages and to adopt this new vision of the universe. This was finally accomplished, in line with the dualist imagry of Cartesian theory, by adopting a dualistic religious vision, one which claimed that God had, indeed, created the universe and all that went with it, including human beings.

The settledness and certainty of this natural law vision, governed as it was by acceptance of a speculative, immaterial, a-prior metaphysic was, however, to be short-lived.

Its Epistemology: While Bacon opened the door to this modern world view, it was the mathematician Renee Descartes who perceived

what he thought to be the key to understanding the world and controlling it for human purposes: that key was *mathematics*. Proclaiming that he saw "... that there must be some general science to explain that element as a whole which gives rise to problems abour order and measurement. This [he] perceived was called universal mathematics" (Randall, 241). He went on to conclude that "To speak freely, I am convinced that it [mathematics] is a more powerful instrument of knowledge than any other that has been bequeathed to us by human agency, as being the source of all things!" (Randall, 241-242). Descartes became ". . . the first true believer" in the mechanical world view. (Rifkin, 21).

But, then, because of this emerging belief in a predictable universe, in a universe whose laws were governed by the principle of reversibility, which this mathematical vision of regularity required, God was respectfully and cautiously retired from the scene, and at the same time given credit for having masterminded the design and construction of this marvelously predictable universe; the metaphysic of Deism was born!

Its Axiology: This mechanical universe proved to be quite irresistible. One after another of leading thinkers such as Newton, Locke,, and Adam Smith became some of its more prominent popularizers. The laws which would increasingly describe this mechanical universe would

enable us to shape our values, our choices about life. Our ethical decisions could be made on rational, fixed, static, grounds. Our growing knowledge of the structure of the objects in this mechanical world would enable us to structure our behaviors, to order the quality of our behaviors, in increasingly ethical ways.

The Post-Modern Perspective

Its Metaphysic: The world view which has been coming inceasingly into existence might be descirbed as one of *increasing complexity* . A world view grounded in uncertainy, in unpredictability, in instability; a world governed by what Prigogine and Stengers describe as dynamic "nonequilibrium instabilities" (207).

Its Epistemology: The initial step toward a modification of the Modern perspective occurred in the nineteenth century with the discovery of the theory of heat, of the laws of thermodynamics. Nascent emergence of this post-modern perspective can be detected when "Fire became part of experimental science during the eighteenth century, starting a conceptual transformation" that forced adherents of the mechanistic view of the universe "to reconsider what [they] had previously rejected in the name of the mechanistic world view, topics such a irreversibility and complexity" (Prigogine and Stengers, 103).

Its Axiology: The view of value which is generated by thermodynamics, in contrast to the mechanical dynamics of the earlier perspective, with its stress on settled structures, on absolutes, on predictables, with its hierarchies of values, is one of uncertainty, of indeterminateness, of constant emergence of complexity; one in which, as Dewey so clearly perceived, "The ethical import of the doctrine of evolution is enormous. But its import has been misconstrued because the doctrine has been appropriated by the very traditional notions which in truth it subverts. It has been thought that the doctrine of evoluton means the complelte subordination of present change to a future goal. It has been constrained to teach a futile dogma of approximation, instead of a gospel of present growth. The usufruct of the new science has been seized upon by the old tradition of fixed and external ends: In fact evolution means continuity of change; and the fact that change may take the form of present growth of complexity and interaction. Significant stages in change are found not in access of fixity of attainment but in those crises in which a seeming fixity of habits gives way to a release of capacities that have not previously functioned: in times that is of readjustment and redirection . . . There is something pitifully juvenile in the idea that "evolution," progress, means a definite sum of accomplishment which will

forever stay done, and which by an exact amount lessens the amount still to be done . . . disposing once and for all of just so many perplexities and advancing us just so far on our road to a final stable and unperplexed goal" (Dewey, 284-285).

The Fundamental Principle - Sixteen Words

During the very time when the nascent images of thermodynamics were beginning to reveal themselves in the eighteenth century through the science of chemistry, political leaders in our country were concentrating on constructing a constitution which would enable peoples with many different religious persuasions to live together in peaceful, nonrestrictive, noncoercive ways.

Operating, one may assume, on the principles associated with the mechanical dynamics of the modern view of the world, they fashioned a logical, rational instrument which was designed not only to cope with the contemporaneous problems of their time, but also with the potential for handling the increasing complexities which were bound to emerge in a dynamic, developing country. This was clearly their intent when they adopted the ninth amendment to the Constitution which stipulates that "The enumeration in the Constitution of certain rights, shall not be construed to deny or disparage others retained by the people." Clearly our

Founding Fathers had in mind the likelihood that additional rights would emerge as our country continued to grow in complexity in the future.

In addition, and particularly pertinent to the purpose of this paper, they adopted the First Amendment which stipulates that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for redress of grievances."

While scientific understandings about fire and heat which were destined to have a lasting impact on the mechanistic Modern World View were beginning to emerge during the eighteenth century, so too do the first sixteen words of this amendment, **"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof;** . . . ." epitomize the construction of a radical social experiment unique in human history which would have a profound, and durable impact on our nation's culture as it became increasingly pluralistic.

As Field has stated, "The greatest achievement ever made in the cause of human progress is the total and final separation of church and state. If we had nothing else to boast of, we could lay claim with justice

that first among the nations we of this country made it an article of organic law that the relations between man and his Maker were a private concern, into which other men have no right to intrude. To measure the stride thus made for the Emancipation of the race, we have only to look over the centuries that have gone before us, and recall the dreadful persecutions in the name of religion that have filled the world" (Field, 6).

Despite these bitter persecutions, however, there was one particularly significant radical voice which was heard during the Medieval period; a voice which was destined to have a profound influence both on those responsible for initiating the Reformation and also on the founders of our constitutional democracy. That courageous, radical voice belonged to Marsilius of Padua whose great book Defensor Pacis appeared in 1324. In this book he denied not only to the Pope, but to the bishops and clergy, any coercive jurisdiction or the right to pronounce interdicts or excommunications. . . The Pope's power was to be limited to spiritual pre-eminence (Encyclopedia Brittanica, 973).

Because, as Pfeffer has pointed out, "The whole history of medieval Europe revolved around the continual struggle for supremacy between prince and Pope, and the resulting religious wars and persecution of heretics and nonconformists. . . the fathers of our Constitution sought to

keep [such incidents] from this country when they established the unique experiment of the mutual independence of religious and political sovereignties" (Pfeffer, 16-17).

Madison pointed out in his Memorial and Remonstrance that religion is a right of people "Because, finally, "the equal right of every citizen to the free exercise of his religion, according to the dictates of his conscience," is held by the same tenure with all our other rights. If we recur to its origin, it is equally the gift of nature; if we weigh its importance, it cannot be less dear to us; if we consult the "declaration of those rights which pertain to the good people of Virginia, as the basis and foundation of government," it is enumerated with equal solemnity, or, rather, studied emphasis" (Madison, in Kliebard, 55).

Indeed, one of the primary purposes of this paper is to emphasize the importance to our country and to all of humankind, of the construction and adoption of this American social experiment which, in the words of Thomas Jeffereson, built "a wall of separation between Church & State . . ." (Haynes, 48). And, at the same time, to point out the deadly theocratic implications and consequences for our society which are likely to emerge if the assault which the forces of the Radical Religious Right have mounted to frustrate and defeat this experiment are successful.

Creating a Political Theocracy: The Assault

Let us examine this concerted effort to assault the principle of the "wall of separation between church and state" by examining the agenda which is driving this assault as this agenda can be inferred from statements made by outspoken proponents of this powerful effort. Further, let us identify some of the methodologies which the Radical Religious Right is employing to achieve its ends.

Consider the implications of the perspective of Beverley LaHaye, a strong proponent of the Radical Religious Right position , when she observers that "[T]oday instead of protecting our right to freely exercise our religious faith in public places, publicly honoring our God and Creator as our forefathers did, we are forbidden to speak, to pray aloud, to read the Bible, to even teach Judeo-Christian values in our public schools and other public places because of an imaginary 'wall of separation' conjured by nonbelievers" (LaHaye, 5).

Add her words to those of North who has insisted that "We [the Radical Religious Right] must use the doctrine of religious liberty to gain independence for christian schools until we train up a generation of people who know that there is not religious neutraility. They will get busy in constructing a Bible-based social, political, and religious order which

finally denies the religious liberty of the enemies of God" (North, 5-6).

The significance of the decision made by the Christian Coalition to invite every major potential 1996 Republican presidential hopeful, including Dan Quayle, Bill Bennett, Bob Dole, Dick Cheney, and Phil Gramm to attend the recent "Road to Victory" conference which the Coalition sponsored in Washington, D.C. during September should not be overlooked. When Pat Robertson, Ralph Reed and Jay Sekulow left town following the conference they proclaimed that their organization had "rise[n] to where God intends us to be in this nation . . . one of the most powerful political forces that have ever been in the history of America" (Lynn, 1).

The strategies employed by the Radical Religious Right cut across a number of dimensions of the world of schooling. Among the more important ones are teacher education, school curriculum, censorship and the election of members to Boards of Education throughout the country. Even outright lies are employed to disseminate their brand of thinking.

Threading its way through each of these strategies is a self-imposed disciplinary technique which may be the movements most important method. This technique stresses a 'stealth' approach to achieve its ends. By 'stealth' is meant the need to avoid exposing one's position publicly, to pursue the goals which direct the activities of the movement

in a fashion which avoids as much as possible the need to express one's views in the public forum. It is ironic that today, when we are beginning to realize how much we have kept religious people out of the public square, and how important it is that we enable them to have their voices heard, the Radical Religious Right is pursuing a strategy which exacerbates this exclusion from free, open discourse and debate. But that is just what they are engaged in doing.(See, for instance, the work of Carter and of Newhouse).

A good example of the consequence of employing this stealth technique is now emerging from the Lake County School District in Florida. After two years of Radical Religious Right domination of its school board, residents have become aware of just how important it is to have a public school system that welcomes children and youth from all religious faiths, and how important the principle of the "Wall of Separation" is for a healthy, dynamic society. Many citizens are beginning to recognize the importance of the belief that "before you vote for anybody, you had better ask some hard questions. . . You had better know what is the platform and the agenda. Don't let anyone be a stealth candidate. Have debates and forums, be knowledgeable voters" (Boston, 11).

This is especially important when you consider the ominous

outcomes implicit in the intentions of Ralph Reed, the Executive Director of the Christian Coalition which are clearly revealed when he stipulates that ". . . What Christians have got to do is to take back this country, one precinct at a time, one neighborhood at a time and one state at a time. . . . I honestly believe that in my lifetime we will see a country once again governed by Christians . . . . and Christian values" (Reed, 27).

One of the significant efforts to affect the curriculum is through the use of the bible in the classroom. Because of this effort, we should never lose sight of the fact that, as Stevenson so accurately points out, ". . . the Bible is not a text by a single author, and the religious traditions based on it are notoriously diverse" (41).

Boston points out that abusing bible courses is just one form of the Radical Religious Right's new stealth evangelisms. Several organizations advocating this position, he observes, suggest ". . . that evangelical and fundamentalist teachers work to slip discussions of religion into the curriculum whenever possible" (6).

Consider the profound measure of untruth which saturates the words of Simonds when he says "It's easy to work ourselves to exhaustion, knowing that [the] NEA (National Education Association's radical left-wing teacher's union), and the ACLU (so-called American Civil Liberties

Union) are out to destroy Religious Freedom, the Bill of Rights and our children's morality" (Simonds, 1-2).

Etzioni points out that ". . . those who would impose civic or moral virtues by suppressing dissent (in the name of religion, patriotism, or any other cause), or censoring books, that their cure is ineffective, harmful, and morally untenable. At the same time divergent moral positions need not lead to cacophony. Out of genuine dialogue," Etzioni reasonably argues, "clear voices can arise, and shared aspirations can be identified and advanced" (255).

To summarize, both the agenda of the Radical Religious Right and its methodologies reveal that "it is a mean-spirited religio-political movement with an ends-justifies-the-means approach" (Editorial, 14). It aims is take control of the government and its educational institutions by any means necessary.

Normative Suggestions

What alternatives are available to those of us who have a strong belief in the beauty of religious pluralism and in the political institutional strength which our country derives from the principle of "Separation of Church and State"? Let me mention a few.

1. Our main, overriding task is to develop a renewed sense of common cultural purpose and the importance of the most fundamental principles which undergird that purpose. One of those principles stipulates that **"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; . . . ."**

2. We need to defend and preserve this and other principles if our pluralistic country is continue flourishing and developing. Professional organizations like ours need to understand the efforts of the Radical Religious Right to create a theocracy, to assault by whatever means are available, one of our most cherished institutions, the public school. The membership of our organization, both individually and collectively, must be willing to do something about it. Unfortunately, this has not been the focus of our organization. Instead there has been a large emphasis on talking about matters which are somewhat removed from the world in which we find this threat actually taking place. And, whatever conversation and dialogue we do engage in as an organization seems always to be limited to insignificant problems and projects that only seem to reveal how small and unimportant our organization actually is.

3. We have to stop talking to ourselves and start aiming at the

general public. We need, in other words, to adopt the role of 'civic pedagogue'. The larger public needs to know that they may soon find themselves forced to live according to the anti-democratic decrees of what can only be labelled as a form of religious fascism. We need to make people aware that religion has nothing to do with morality and that social progress almost invariably emerges from the thought and activiity which has emerged from heritics and dissenters who had the courage to challenge religious authority.

4. We cannot allow our activist impulses to lie dormant. We need constantly to remind ourselves that the Radical Religious Right has declared cultural war on us, and that they are deadly serious about winning. We must engage in an all-out effort to thwart these religious fanatics else we stand to suffer serious and lasting cultural consequences

5. We need to recognize that the cement which holds our pluralistic culture together is found in our Constitution. This instrument, rather than the Ten Commandments, or any other dogmatic religious document, represents a form of religion, let us call it our *civil religion,* which binds us together as a nation. I recognize that, as Neuhaus points out, ". . . 'Civil Religion' . . . usually does not call itself a religion but [it] is that cluster

of beliefs and symbols which Geertz describes as defining a society to itself" (206-207). However, because the cluster of beliefs which are found in our constitution are so vital to the continued vitality of our pluralistic culture, it does seem to me that we can easily justify labelling this document our *civil religion*, and suggesting that beliefs and principles contained in this religion are the ones that ought to be taught, honored and celebrated in our public schools.

6. We need to abolish the metaphor of the 'melting pot' which has dominated the description of our pluralistic culture since Hector St. John generated this imagry in 1782. In its place we need to consider a new metaphor, one which recognizes the importance of providing each person, each group, with an opportunity to participate in the public square, one which would renew and strengthen the quality of our civic life while at the same time mitigating the increasingly uncivil, tribalistic form of public discourse which has been gradually emerging during the past fifteen years. Such a metaphor could be the *'round table'*. Each of us would have a place at the table; each of us would be able to retain our uniqueness. At the same time we would be held together by a center which is our Constitution, our 'civil religion'. This is the religion that can and must be taught in our public schools if the pluralistic quality of our nation

is to thrive.

Conclusion

As I have argued and urged throughout this paper, we have got to recognize that the assault on our public schools, the effort to construct a theocracy in this country, is not simply an expression of various opinions, the sharing of perspectives by various more-or-less committed people. No, this is not at all the case. The conflict with which this paper has dealt is far deeper than this. It is a conflict over the very basic way in which people perceive reality: modern versus post-modern, over deeply divergent, basicly incommensurable images about truth, about the good, about the nature of community, about the nature and role of public schools, about the nature of teaching and the role of curriculum, about the very existence of our culture as we have come to know and cherish it. We are engaged in a very real struggle with powerful organizations and persons who wish to reconstruct our national identity, a struggle which could, unless we are exceptionally vigilant and active in resisting those pursuing this reconstructive end, have a profound and lastingly constraining impact on how our pluralistic culture engages in and fosters free, unfettered discourse in which people with sharply opposing

viewpoints can continue to respect and responsibly relate with one another.

It is vitally important that we remember the observatin of Neuhaus when he argues that ". . . there is also a very legitmate fear of the divisive force of religion . . . it is based in the rememberance of the religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but that rememberance has been refreshed by bloodlettings in the modern era . . . To ignore the role of religion in the ongoing story of America," he accurately asserts, "is deliberately to blind ourselves to reality" (Neuhaus, 206).

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